CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Although I cannot actually conclude my evaluative involvement with Shakespeare's sonnets, I am now in a position to wind up the present argument. To do so, I must face a few poems not yet accounted for that have become established in public esteem, and a couple of others that should have become so established, and explain why each of these poems falls below the first rank of Shakespeare's accomplishments in the sonnet form. In the process I should be able to elucidate the principles of evaluation, chiefly those of integrity and scope, to which I have alluded during the course of this study.

One of the most famous sonnets in the collection is 55:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rime;
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
> When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
> And broils root out the work of masonry,
> Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
> The living record of your memory.
> 'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
> Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
> Even in the eyes of all posterity
> That wear this world out to the ending doom.
> So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

The opening of this poem no doubt reveals Shakespeare exercising his gifts at something like full power. The equivocal syntax of "marble," by forcing the reader to cope with the term as both a qualifier and a substantive, that is, as both the material of monuments and as monuments themselves, renders the durability of marble with special force. The reader is thus made to recognize that marble will outlast the gilding that covers it and the images carved into it, that it will endure even after it is buried in rubble. The depredations such products of civilization may suffer have also been described with great power. Even line 7, partly because "Mars" crystallizes

the allusion to book II of the *Aeneid* suggested in lines 5-6 and partly because of the appropriateness of its two suggested activities, slashing and burning, to the destruction of the written "record" described in line 8, is here invested with wonderful vitality.

The energy with which Shakespeare has described this conflict between time and civilization, however, ruins the argument—or, rather, the assertion—to which the poem is explicitly dedicated. "Marble" seems much more reliable as the material of a memorial than "this pow'rful rime." The figurative description of rhyme's power, that is, that it will allow a friend or love to "shine . . . bright in these contents," even if we take "contents" as a pun, is vague and unconvincing especially in comparison with the impressive indications of lapidary endurance and lapidary squalor between which it has been sandwiched in the first quatrain. The assertion of rhyme's power is squeezed, similarly, into the last line of the second quatrain and opposed by a destructiveness which, despite the contrary assertion, must overwhelm not only books but whole libraries. Shakespeare has thus presented the effects of time on civilization throughout the first two quatrains of 55 in such a way that the "living record" on which he pins his promise to his friend must be included in the ruin. And the exalted assurance in the third quatrain rings hollow. The misplaced intensities of 55, then, destroy its integrity.

The bare assertion on which Shakespeare inflicted such an impressive depredation might have been maintained if he had presented some countering argument as he may have done in another of the more famous of these poems, Sonnet 107:

> Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
> Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
> Can yet the lease of my true love control,
> Supposed as forfeit to a cónfined doom.
> The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
> And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
> Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
> And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
> Now with the drops of this most balmy time
> My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
> Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rime,
> While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes;
> And thou in this shalt find thy monument
> When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

Here the poet takes a much more modest stance, not only describing literary monuments as "poor rime," but giving up the claim that poetry itself is alive.

The preservation of such a memorial, moreover, he acknowledges—or so the poem can be understood—to depend on the preservation of England,

and of English speech. While time insults over "dull and speechless tribes," tribes who have been reduced by military invaders or who have reduced themselves to military invaders—one remembers that Cortez knew no Aztec and that Pizarro was illiterate—this little poem will enjoy the continued existence provided by England's security and the enduring English tongue. This argument heavily depends on Leslie Hotson's interpretation of "the mortal moon" as the Spanish Armada of 1588.[1] Take away that, even if you substitute Queen Elizabeth for "the mortal moon," and the indications of a successfully concluded war are reduced to the "peace" and "olives" of line 8 and, perhaps, to the "spent . . . tyrants' crests" of line 14: and the argument dwindles.

Even understanding "the mortal moon" as the Armada and transporting the impression of a decisive English victory back into the first quatrain, the argument is still loose and the poem incompletely integrated. Nothing in the first ten lines suggests any literary or any monumental concerns. The most likely meaning of these lines would be, rather, that one or both of the participants in the poem were soldiers—or endangered civilians, perhaps —whose lives and consequently whose love have been made secure by the conclusion of a happy and reliable peace. Thus the promise of a continued life in "rime," which is first introduced in line 11, seems "poor" indeed. Why might not these lovers enjoy such a balmy time together in the flesh—at least for the tenure of their natural lives? Sonnet 107, like 55, opens very impressively; and it also goes to pieces, although not in the same way, as it goes along.

Sonnet 107 owes much of its fame to the fact that it is a scholar's conundrum. Sonnet 94 owes its greater fame, at least in part, to the fact that it is a critic's conundrum:

> They that have pow'r to hurt, and will do none,
> That do not do the thing they most do show,
> Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
> Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow —
> They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
> And husband nature's riches from expense;
> They are the lords and owners of their faces,
> Others but stewards of their excellence.
> The summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet,
> Though to itself it only live and die;
> But if that flow'r with base infection meet,
> The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

The integrity of this poem or, more precisely, the relationship between the first two quatrains and the rest presents an insoluble problem. The fit is so loose, indeed, that a reader cannot be sure whether "They that . . . are

themselves as stone" in the first eight lines is reflected in the last six by the flower or the summer.[2] Since both these figurative candidates are singular, both stand at a considerable remove from those persons represented above as "They." The flower seems more nearly equivalent in syntax: "They are" and the "flow'r is." This parallel is neither very emphatic nor very comprehensive, of course: "They are," which comes only in line 7, is preceded by "they do inherit" and a variety of subordinate material; and it is fulfilled, not by an adjective, but by a noun. Not only this, but "summer" seems in position at least to be more nearly a reflection of "They": "They" begins lines 1 and 5, as well as 7; "summer" stands at the beginning of line 9. The fact that this term is introduced in the genitive, on the other hand, weakens the identification.

The apparent imperviousness of summer makes it seem, nevertheless, to resemble the "Unmoved . . . They" above more, at least, than does the sweet and susceptible "flow'r," although neither candidate could be described as "cold"—nor compared at all to "stone." The focus on "that flow'r" in line 10, however, gives it a place at the center of interest that may seem to settle the question of equivalence; but it is immediately described in ways that obviously differentiate it from the impervious "They." There is, then, a gap in this poem that resists even the most determined responsiveness, a gap that can only be filled by sympathetic speculation.[3]

Sonnet 94 also presents a problem, a puzzle, in scope: is the poem general or particular in reference—or is it somehow both? And if both, what precisely are the general and the particular foci? How many people are canopied by "They"? Or should the reader, responding to the special intensity of the tone—even if he cannot define that intensity—and, perhaps, by a recollection of Aristotle's unmoved mover, take "They" to be a disguise for "he" or, especially if he looks back to 93, for "you"? This emphatically repeated plural has at any rate a singular, a pointedly personal, cast. The third quatrain, on the other hand, although singular in its syntax, seems, chiefly because of the figure, to be general in its import—although it can hardly be a generalization of the substance of the first two quatrains. There was only one of "They," the reader suspects, only one person of the poet's acquaintance who deserves the extreme description here accorded; but there must be many a flower that meets with "base infection." The focus of the couplet on "things" and "Lilies" confirms the general sense of the third quatrain, but this merely augments the reader's doubts about the scope of the first two quatrains, leaving him with unanswerable questions about the range and the reference of the whole poem.

Other famous sonnets present problems of scope that can be more easily determined. Sonnet 146, for example, "Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth," although explicitly individual in its address, is obviously

general in its meaning. The largely conventional figures and diction, by which it is developed, were described as "commonplace" by Yvor Winters;[4] and truly, they must be generally relevant to be relevant at all. The emptiness of this poem's apparent particularity can best be illuminated, perhaps, as Winters suggested, by recalling John Donne's religious sonnets. Throughout "Batter my heart" and in the dramatic narrowing at line 9 of "At the round earth's imagined corners," Donne projects a felt personal involvement in divine mysteries. But the dogmatic bifurcation with which Shakespeare opens 146 and the dogmatic logic with which he develops it offer, at the very most, an all-purpose assurance to the faithful.[5]

A number of Shakespeare's sonnets, on the other hand, and indeed a number of fine ones, are narrowly personal in scope. Consider Sonnet 90:

> Then hate me when thou wilt! if ever, now!
> Now, while the world is bent my deeds to cross,
> Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
> And do not drop in for an after-loss.
> Ah, do not, when my heart hath scaped this sorrow,
> Come in the rearward of a conquered woe;
> Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,
> To linger out a purposed overthrow.
> If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
> When other petty griefs have done their spite,
> But in the onset come. So shall I taste
> At first the very worst of fortune's might;
> And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
> Compar'd with loss of thee will not seem so.

The poet, conceiving of the mere possibility of an eventual rupture between himself and his friend, reworking with greater intensity the supposition that underlies 49, insists that a rupture be made as quickly and as decisively as possible. The extremity of this request, which is asserted with "hate"—a quite different term from the logically necessary "hate" with which 89 was concluded—is maintained partly by the imperative mood and partly by the kaleidoscopic persistence of a military metaphor—"Join with . . . make me bow . . . scaped . . . rearward . . . conquered . . . overthrow . . . onset . . . might." This figure might, somewhat like the legal figure that pervaded 87, indicate a private irony, except for the obviously theoretical quality of the basic supposition and the obvious sincerity of the tone. No indication is given in this poem, as one was throughout 87, that the friend intends to desert the poet. The poet's request is apparently self-willed and thus apparently sincere.

The poem's diction enforces the intense particularity, the extremity, of the poet's stance. Line 8, for example, "To linger out a purposed overthrow," although it can be described as an infinitive, a qualifier, and a substantive, is completely composed of verbals. In this poem Shakespeare

has also employed a number of compound words: besides the two in line 8, there are "drop in," "after-loss," rearward," and "onset." These compounds, several of which appear only here in all his work, enforce the uniqueness of his stance. Such practices were required, the reader may infer, for the poet to accommodate the English language to such an extraordinary attitude. Sonnet 90 does acknowledge a larger frame than that which defines the poet, the beloved, and the strange request. The poet calculates an opposition between all the real "spite" and real "woe" that "the world" can otherwise bring upon him and the imagined loss of the friend. This opposition, which is reduced to an equation in the couplet, permeates the poem. But Shakespeare has here presented the world merely to deny its importance. Just as he has used the word "come" in line 11 to mean "go," he has drawn the world into the poem at large merely to throw it out. In lines 2 and 3 the world's activity, although described rather broadly, is recognized as a matter of moment; but all it can inflict on the poet is reduced in the second quatrain to "a conquered woe" and in the third, still further, to "other petty griefs." This progressive reduction prepares for the logic of the couplet, in which the world is simply wiped out of account; and it makes Sonnet 90 a very coherent poem. But the coherence has been achieved at a serious sacrifice in scope, and at a sacrifice, moreover, that the poem itself brings to the reader's attention.

By including the world in Sonnet 90, then, Shakespeare has himself indicated the grounds on which I have based my complaint against it. Other personal poems, however, focus almost exclusively upon the poet and his beloved. The most fully achieved of these, or so I believe, is Sonnet 138:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth
> I do believe her, though I know she lies,
> That she might think me some untutored youth,
> Unlearnèd in the world's false subtilties.
> Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
> Although she knows my days are past the best,
> Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
> On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
> But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
> And wherefore say not I that I am old?
> O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
> And age in love loves not to have years told.
> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

This poem takes up some place in our world, of course: the poet, while trying to pretend to his mistress that he has no knowledge of "the world's false subtleties," admits such a knowledge to his reader—and to himself. But the described conduct of the poet and his mistress is more subtle than the world, for all its subtleties, could abide. Their conduct is, of course,

relevant only to themselves. The apparently general statements in lines 11 and 12, we may notice, are focused with meticulous precision, first, on the man's remarkable pretense toward his beloved and, second, on his desire for her to practice a corresponding pretense toward him. Both these general statements, and especially the first, are false, the reader may well feel, except in their application to this peculiar case. The couplet, again, despite its obtrusively logical introduction, explains nothing beyond the peculiar "love" these two have established in resolving their faults by lies into flattery.

The language in which this exposition is couched no doubt resists its present employment. The puns on "made" and "lies" in the first line-pair enforce an attitude of watchful, not to say cynical, alertness and prepare the reader to entertain a serious difference between the present usages and his own normal employments, especially of such words as "love" and "truth." This lover, he thus comes to see, means "pretend" by "believe"; and, by "thinking" and "think," this lover is describing, not two sincere states of mind, but rather the cast of two false countenances. But even as the reader recognizes the equivocal value of this lover's usages, he no doubt maintains his own common-sense grasp on all these terms: that is how he measures the abnormality of the present love relationship. The close-coupled explanation of what "love loves" in line 12 especially prompts the reader to remember his own understanding of the actions and the attitudes of love. In this context, "love" represents the whole tissue of hypocrisy to which the poet and his mistress have been reduced; and "loves" indicates the poet's meager selfishness, meaning something like "requires" or "depends." Such usages recall to every reader his own high ideals of love and loving—such ideals as those suggested by 116—if not his own practices. The reader himself would never describe such an entanglement, such a tissue of lies and pretenses, with the word "love." The poet, on the other hand, as the hideous lucidity of his exposition implies, has grown accustomed to this state of things: this rationalized system of actual deception and calculated credulity has become his reality.

Sonnet 138, which discovers the poet turning his feelings, his actions, and even his mind inward upon such a relationship, does not, like Sonnet 90, obtrude upon the reader's notice the question of scope, that principle by which I have judged 90 inferior. One cannot, then, take issue with it as with certain other poems of an essentially personal focus that we have considered. Sonnet 138 is, nevertheless, a less resonant, a less expansive, poetic exercise than such another intensely personal statement as Sonnet 87. And 138 is, precisely because of this, also a less luminous poem. In 87 the reader can judge—must judge—the rights of affection by reference to the rights of law: such references, as I have tried to show, illuminate human life both as a particular activity and as a universal concern. But in 138, the reader is

limited to one particular and to one particularly vicious relationship. He can resist its claims, its definitions, and its logic, but that is all. Lacking a reliable sounding board, the reader cannot even ascertain the poet's tone: is he reconciled?—bitter?—dismayed?—detached?—amused?—at the cleft stick his particular exercise in romantic logic has become? An idealistic reader will describe the poet's tone as pained or bitter; a cynic or a misogynist will describe him as realistic or even, perhaps, amused.[6] In 138 Shakespeare has hooded his own understanding, his actual feelings, and thus given his reader a diminished access to his humanity.

Among the twenty or thirty best poems in the collection entitled *Shakespeares Sonnets,* then, the identities of which I have indicated at least as precisely as the case allows, there are or there seem to me to be four of special excellence: 87, 104, 121, and 129. None of these poems is perfect nor, to speak more pragmatically, so good a poem as it might conceivably be. "Dream" in 129, "swerving" in 87, and "green" in 104 are all terms of questionable validity, terms that may not quite sustain the attention that the poet has focused on them. The "eye-I-eyed" phrase in 104, again, a system in which sound is at irreconcilable odds with both syntax and meter, is artistically unfortunate despite its relevance to the relationship between seeing and being seen that infuses the whole poem. Line 10 of 129 somewhat lowers the intensity and somewhat retards the movement of that poem; and the couplet of 121, despite the pertinence of its ambiguities and its fine satiric edge, brings this sonnet to rest in a somewhat diminished poetic vein. Recognizing this, however, I nevertheless believe that these four poems are the most fully achieved and the most rewarding in the whole collection.

Although I would judge 129 to be the greatest poem of all and the most indicative of Shakespeare's special poetic qualities, it does not adequately represent the range of poetry he has achieved in the *Sonnets* as a whole. The four great poems I have attempted to distinguish, however, very nearly do so. Two of them are poems of personal and two of them are poems of public address. Two of them are crucially relevant to Shakespeare's tragic apprehension of time; one (87) is an exercise in sustained irony; and one (121), it seems to me, is essentially comic. These four poems not only represent Shakespeare's achievement in the sonnet form as fully as any four sonnets would do, however; they also reveal his sonnet style at full strength.

Whether one selects these four poems or others among the twenty or thirty best in this famous collection, however, I believe he should recognize and confront any problems, any anomalies, any limitations, or any weaknesses that emerge. The intensity with which virtually all of these poems have been individually organized and with which their elements have been

defined indicates this kind of address. Such an evaluative attitude will lead, moreover, both to an incisive discussion of any immediate poetic example and to a positive, a credible, exposition of English poetry in general.

NOTES

1. Leslie Hotson, "Shakespeare's Sonnets Dated," in *Discussions of Shakespeare's Sonnets,* ed. Barbara Herrnstein (Boston: Heath, 1964), pp. 10-19.

2. I have derived certain ideas here expressed on Sonnet 94 from an unpublished essay by Judith Matthews Craig and from several conversations with Ms. Craig.

3. For an impressive exercise of this kind, see William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1960), pp. 89-115. In "Shakespeare's Sonnet XCIV," *Shakespeare Quarterly* **22** (1971): 397-399, Elias Schwartz has explicitly admitted the inexactitude of the fit between the two parts of this poem.

4. Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery* (Chicago: Swallow, 1967), pp. 60-61.

5. Michael West, "The Internal Dialogue of Shakespeare's Sonnet 146," *Shakespeare Quarterly* **25** (1974): 109-122, provides a valuable summary of the critical discussion of this poem to date. His detection of a personal quality in it—of a religious turmoil within the poet —I do not find convincing.

6. See Philip Martin, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1972), pp. 49-54, on disagreements among critics with respect to the tone of this poem. One critic calls it "jaunty," another "grim," as Martin notes; he, himself, would probably describe it, or so I gather, as an expression of detachment or "acceptance." Martin's description of this poem's movement is very fine.